

“It’s nice to know you might make a difference”: engaging students through primary research as an authentic assessment.

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Abstract

This paper presents the views of undergraduate students on taking part in a small-scale student-staff research project to inform the design of a local community play space. The project repositioned students as researchers by providing them with an opportunity to engage in primary research with children through an authentic assessment task in a final year module. The students took on responsibility for the design and implementation of the primary research to elicit the views of young children aged 6-7 years, alongside Higher Education (HE) lecturers who collected the views of other key users of the space. The students experienced the project as engaging, challenging and as an opportunity for individual professional development, resulting in valuable learning including, increased confidence, professional aptitudes, and applied research skills. While finding much potential in co-research projects for student engagement, we recognise barriers within the higher education curriculum that mitigate against their success as part of assessment. The reconceptualization of HE within a market economy and the changing expectations of students further limit the success of such projects.

Keywords

Student engagement; authentic assessment; student researchers; staff -student research; primary research.

Introduction

This research project involved two UK HE lecturers and 13 BA (Hons) Early Childhood Studies students enrolled on a final year module entitled ‘Creative opportunities and Possibilities’. The module assessment required students to evaluate a space of their choice for creative potential and produce a report of recommendations. A timely discussion with a landscape architect from a local district council, afforded the opportunity for the students to evaluate two existing play spaces which were due for upgrading by the council and to elicit the views of 60 primary age children from the local area. This provided students with an authentic assessment opportunity which would allow them to apply their learning from the module, implement their developing research skills and see their recommendations implemented in the environment instead of offering hypothetical recommendations as an exercise in evaluation.

The project ran over one year and incorporated three phases. Phase 1 involved the 13 final year students in primary research with children aged 6-7 years and took place during a 12-week period in line with the module schedule. Phase 2 involved the authors of this paper eliciting the views of parents of very young children attending a

Sure Start Children's Centre, as well as gathering the views of children and young people attending a youth club. The findings from phases 1 and 2 were written up as a formal report with recommendations which was presented to the district council and also as a research paper (Yates and Oates, 2019). The recommendations were accepted by the district council in January 2018, resulting in the relocation and upgrade of one of the parks (See Yates and Oates, 2019). Both parks are situated in an ex-coal mining community in the north midlands of England, UK.

This paper focuses on Phase 3, which followed the first two phases and considers the views of students on their involvement in the primary research and their resulting learning from the project. We reflect upon the use of authentic assessment as a means of increasing student engagement and responsibility to enable deep learning. Three elements of authenticity as discussed by Wald and Harland (2017) will be considered in relation to the findings, these are: authenticity as relating to the real-world, the existential authentic self, and personal meaning. The changing relationship between lecturer and student within HE, reconceptualised within a market economy, will also be discussed (Carey, 2013; Molesworth, Nixon and Scullion, 2009); alongside implications for teaching and assessment.

Student engagement through authentic assessment

There has been an increased focus on authentic assessment within higher education over the past decade (Jopp, 2019) despite authenticity being a vague and contested concept (Wald and Harland, 2017). Jopp (2019) describes authentic assessment as a key component of authentic learning, which;

refers to the application of 'real world' tasks which enable students to demonstrate the attainment of new knowledge and skills within an educational context (Jopp, 2019:2).

He further suggests that authentic assessment can enhance engagement, active involvement, student learning and prepare students for an uncertain world. According to Wald and Harland (2017) authenticity, as a socially constructed concept, is dependent on context and is therefore contested with multiple interpretations and uses. They identify three elements of authenticity in relation to research in ecology: authenticity as relating to the real-world, the existential authentic self, and a degree of meaning. Drawing on the ideas of Dewey, they suggest that student learning needs to be relevant to the real world as opposed to just being an exercise in learning, noting the links between theory and practice. They discuss the existential authentic self, drawing on multiple writers, (for example, Adorno, Sartre, Heidegger) identifying responsibility and ownership as important elements for independent learning. This involves responsibility for the formulation of questions, as well as finding answers (Wald and Harland, 2017). They further surmise that the existential authentic self includes the awareness of "one's own possibilities and purpose in life, and commitment to one's inner views" (p.756). Within HE there are limited opportunities for personal meaning in "imposed tasks and required knowledge" (Wald and Harland, 2017:757), so positioning students as researchers, as we did in this research project, can provide autonomy and ownership over learning resulting in more opportunities for

authenticity and personal investment as described here. Kahn (2014) has previously noted that student engagement can be enhanced through high impact practices, such as research, which require students to assume responsibility, uncertainty and reflexivity. Furthermore, Argent (2020) identifies that engagement in research can afford empowerment and intrinsic motivation to learn. She also identifies extrinsic motivation for learning (due to the reliance of students on each other's contribution and engagement).

Action research requires students to apply their accrued knowledge to real life scenarios, which involves “performativity and real-world connectivity” (Maxwell, 2012: 689). The research in discussion in this paper similarly required the students to apply their knowledge of early childhood play, research with children and ethics to a real-world scenario. The students were also required to take on the role of experts and advisors in early childhood at certain critical points, shifting responsibility for learning to the students, while the lecturers took on the role of facilitators. Wald and Harland (2017) note the shift in the teacher student-relationship necessary for authenticity which they liken to the relationship in postgraduate supervision. Within our research project, our role as HE lecturers conformed to this approach as the students were afforded autonomy over the design, implementation and writing up of the results of their research as part of their module assessment. However, organisational hindrances such as fixed learning goals can get in the way of co - research projects such as these (Bergmark and Westman, 2016) and support is important for both parties in co-research because of the unfamiliarity of the learning territory (Dickerson, Jarvis and Stockwell, 2016; Bovill and Felten, 2016).

The Changing Nature of Higher Education.

The changing relationship between lecturer and student within the current climate of UK higher education, has more recently been reconceptualised within a market economy (Molesworth, et al. 2009; Carey, 2013). This has resulted in a shift in student expectations of higher education and lecturers. Students are encouraged to evaluate and compare institutions using data and statistics repositioning them as customers (Dickerson et al., 2016), consequently, there is increased pressure on academics to provide value for money. According to Jensen and Bennett (2016:43) this “engenders a sense of entitlement rather than a commitment to an intellectual endeavour” which can lead students to place high expectations on their lecturers to transmit knowledge.

Svojanovsky (2017:344) sees a conflict between a traditional paradigm of education which is based on the assumption of knowledge as fixed and certain, “extracted through an authority figure”, and an alternative paradigm, which rests on students taking on reflective thinking and becoming responsible for their own learning. He argues, this shift in emphasis places high value on activities that accrue credit and less value on activities that do not. Similarly, the commodification of higher education with its business model may alienate students from the learning process. Naidoo (2003:265) suggests that this can result in;

a loss of responsibility for their learning, an instrumental attitude to their work, an unwillingness to be judged and little tolerance for the expansion of study beyond the routine and the predictable.

Authentic assessment tasks which make a difference in the 'real world' can therefore be useful to engage students in their own learning through affording ownership, responsibility and decision making (Jopp, 2019).

Bergmark and Westman (2016) suggest that democratic values promoted in higher education in the Swedish tradition, make obvious the differences between students as consumers and as members of higher education. Drawing on this democratic approach, they note the contributions of Berger and Luckmann (1966) and Wenger (1998) who emphasised that learning is closely connected to participation and the negotiation of meanings. Such a view appreciates diversity and multiple voices, emphasizing that learning takes place in a social and physical context. Drawing on the ideas of Deleuze (2004), Bergmark and Westman (2016) argue that such a view of education and learning is underpinned by mutual and intertwined relationships, whether social, discursive, or material, noting,

A multi-dimensional learning view places high expectations on the students' abilities and willingness to contribute, collaborate and take action in their education (Bergmark and Westman 2016:30).

Within this changing HE context we argue that encouraging ownership and responsibility through authentic assessment is more important than ever. Assessment that affords ownership and impact in the real world is more likely to engage students in the learning process and shift attention to personal, experiential learning rather than the grades accrued from learning tasks.

Students as co-constructors and producers of knowledge

From our experience, Freire's (1972) 'banking' concept of education remains dominant in student perceptions of higher education today. This refers to the transmission of knowledge from the perceived expert (lecturer) to the student as an empty vessel, rather than the relational co-construction of meaning through dialogue. Schnellert, Butler and Higginson, (2008:726) find value in moving away from technical transmission and moving towards "contextualised decision making" in the teaching and learning process. Similarly, Jopp (2019:13) argues that students should not be viewed as "passive consumers of information, delivered by teachers". We view students as co-constructors of knowledge, able to make informed and confident decisions for themselves; positioning students as researchers within an assessment task, therefore passes the responsibility for learning onto the student. Bellinger, Bullen and Ford (2014) highlight the value of students as co-constructors of knowledge resulting in the re-construction of practice to meet current demands and conditions, leading to increased confidence and skills development. However, student-staff co-construction presents many challenges related to boundaries, capabilities, and risk; this can lead to resistance from students who fear or resent, moving out of their traditional roles in HE (Deeley and Brown, 2014). Nevertheless, when students take responsibility for their own learning "they shift from being passive recipients to being active agents" (Bovill et al, 2016:4). Challenges can be overcome through effective communication with students and flexibility concerning institutional norms and practices; through co-creation, students and staff engage more deeply in teaching and

learning, and students develop graduate attributes and employability. Wallin and Aarsand (2019 :71) further acknowledge,

positioning students as knowledge producers is an important step that moves beyond research on students and research with students to research by students. As such, students' positions emerge as central rather than additional, which may disrupt traditional forms of knowledge construction.

Staff student research may also have the potential to provide liminal space, where traditional roles and identities shift and meanings can be negotiated outside of the traditional lecturer-student power hierarchy (Jensen and Bennett, 2016). Liminal space is described by Cousins (2006) as an unstable space where the learner oscillates between old and emergent understandings. Jensen and Bennett (2016) further explain how liminal space can lead to more equal, collaborative relationships with students. Our positioning of students as co-researchers in this project aimed to blur boundaries between HE staff and students by affording them responsibility for phase 1 of the research which included; undertaking the site evaluations, primary research with children, and dissemination of their results. Their attendance at a stakeholder meeting positioned them as experts in early childhood and they were required to take on the shift in expectations within this role. Within these elements of the research, students and lecturers were positioned as equals. This provided opportunities for student identities to shift through taking on responsibility for the research and affording space to negotiate new meanings through participation and evaluation of their actions (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Wenger, 1998)

Methodology

Researcher positionality and students as co- researchers

As HE lecturers we acknowledged our position of power as assessors of the students' work but attempted to ameliorate this by affording equal status to the students by positioning them as co-researchers and experts in the research. The students were responsible for the design, implementation, and dissemination of Phase 1 (see table 1). This involved attendance at a stakeholder meeting, a site evaluation (with the HE Lecturers), the design of research instruments and data collection from children aged 6-7 years, the dissemination of findings through posters for display in the local community, and a formal evaluation report for their module assessment. We, the authors, took responsibility for Phase 2 (see table 1) of the project involving collection of views from young people 8-16 years, parents of babies from the Sure Start centre, and the collation of all results for the formal report for the local district council. The students were invited to contribute to the formal report writing, but were in their final year and completing dissertations; therefore due to the time limits imposed by this, students consented for their findings to be collated and used within the final report by the HE lecturers. Phase 3, (see table 1) student views on the use of authentic assessment and their engagement in the research, was completed by the HE lecturers and is the focus of this paper.

Ethics

Ethical approval for each phase of the project was gained through the University's research ethics committee (See Yates and Oates, 2019). For phase 3, the focus of this paper, informed consent was gained from the participants who responded to the invitation to take part. Furthermore, the British Educational Research Association's (2011) ethical guidelines informed the planning and implementation of this project. We acknowledge the small-scale nature of this study and the lack of generalizability, but we argue that small scale qualitative studies can provide rich data about teaching and learning in higher education (Marquis et al, 2016). They provide insight into an aspect of teaching and learning that is not often seen in many discipline areas of undergraduate higher education.

Table 1 Areas of responsibility in each phase of the project

Project Phase	Activity	Responsibility	Time scale
Phase 1	Attendance at stakeholder meeting	Student researchers	September 2015
	Site evaluation of the two play spaces.	Student researchers	September 2015
	Primary data collection from children aged 6-7years	Student researchers	October 2015
	Formal evaluation report for module assessment / dissemination posters of findings for local community stakeholders	Student researchers	December 2015/ January 2016
Phase 2	Primary data collection young people 8 – 16 years of age.	HE Lecturers	February 2016
	Primary data collection parents of babies from Sure Start centre	HE Lecturers	February 2016
	Formal report for District Council collating all findings	HE Lecturers /drawing from phase 1 & 2 findings	June 2016
Phase 3	Primary research: Student views on the use of authentic assessment	HE Lecturers	November 2016

Participants

All 13 female participants who engaged in the primary research project (phase 1) were invited to take part in this research but only five responded. Although the numbers were small this represents 38% of the original group. The gender imbalance of the cohort is consistent with the wider representation of females within the early childhood workforce (Cameron, Owen and Moss, 2001; Oates and Simmons, 2020). The five

participants who responded were final year students at the time of the primary research on play provision and have since graduated from the university.

Data collection and analysis

We adopted an interpretive paradigm within the research and applied thematic coding to the results (Seale, 2018). A semi-structured, open-ended questionnaire was chosen for data collection, as many of the participants had already left the area, but they were also offered the option of a face to face interview. Of the five who responded, one attended for interview, while the other four returned a questionnaire. The same questions were used in the questionnaires and the interview, although the interview provided more scope for prompts and elaboration. The questions were formulated within three key themes (see table 2) selected by the authors based on the aims of the research and informed by the literature.

The responses from both the questionnaires and the interview were transcribed, collated and coded according to the three themes identified by the authors. (Braun & Clarke, 2014). Responses were first coded as positive and negative, then key themes extracted from these. Questionnaire responses were code as QP and the interview response coded as IP. The results were then considered in relation to the three elements of authenticity as discussed by Wald and Harland (2017) namely, authenticity as relating to the real-world, the existential authentic self, and personal meaning.

Table 2 Questions in questionnaire and interview for phase 3

Theme 1. Being part of a staff /student research project
Students were asked about their initial thoughts on being involved, their experience of the initial meeting with the community and any challenges they experienced.
Theme 2. Research procedure and findings
Students were asked about the site evaluations, the success of their primary research methods with children, and the writing up process. They were also asked about the impacts of the project on their learning and their understanding of children.
Theme 3. Impact upon academic, personal and professional skills
Students were asked their views on being involved in research projects, and any impacts on their learning, skills, and knowledge as a practitioner.

Findings

Theme 1. Being part of a staff /student research project

Within the results students made numerous explicit and implicit references to the real-world nature of the research. Their responses were overwhelmingly positive regarding the authenticity of the task and having “a real purpose for writing” (IP1 & QP1) and three responses identified the impact the project may have on children’s lives (IP1, QP3, QP4).

Students further expressed excitement about going off-site and conducting primary research with children in schools, contributing to learning about future professional roles within schools. The initial meeting with stakeholders which took place to launch the project in the local community was also valued by the students who identified key areas of learning such as teamwork and working with others and paying attention to the rights of the child. One response in relation to the initial meeting with the stakeholders, expressed surprise at the authentic nature of the project commenting, “It was interesting to see that it was actually a proper project” (IP1). However, working with others and “differences of opinion” (QP3) were highlighted as being “challenging” (QP1) and one of the constraints to the project. Further comments demonstrated students’ positive views about the research as an assessment task. QP1 suggests, “all assignments should be like this” and later stated,

This was the most beneficial assessment throughout university as it prepared me for my career more than any other assessment ...I would like to add that I always mention this project to potential employers and they are always impressed and interested by it (QP1).

It was clear that students valued their participation and that this was an unusual occurrence in assessment tasks illustrated in the response, “A rare opportunity to be able to participate and make a positive impact” (QP3).

Three participants highlighted the purposefulness of the project, the benefits for children and the importance of making a difference (IP1, QP3, QP4). Two respondents commented upon the purposeful context of the assessment and its links to real life as well as the value of the practical experiences of carrying out research such as being part of a project team (QP1, QP2). All respondents agreed the project was a beneficial experience as an assessment task. One response clearly highlighted the importance of her voice being valued:

It’s nice to know that you might make a difference and that your opinion counts...like your voice counts...It’s not just an essay you’ve written and then that’s it is done (IP1).

Theme 2. Research procedure and findings

The students were responsible for the field observations and identified the importance of personal reflection and analysis after the observations (IP1, QP4). Others highlighted the importance of gaining different perspectives and the importance of local knowledge. QP2 noted “Experienced working as part of a team and with different people”. The responses also highlighted a strong sense of ownership and

responsibility over the task which resulted in independent learning. A comment from QP4 demonstrates this,

A lot to consider in the site evaluations. It was also crucial for children to express themselves and for us to interpret their ideas correctly (QP4).

The students' recognition of the importance of inclusive practice and adaptability was clear in the responses from IP1, QP3.

It was a good opportunity to talk to locals and listen to expert opinions ...using the word 'park' may have influenced the results. I learned the importance of planning, improvising to meet different needs (e.g. children with hearing difficulties) (QP1).

The importance of reflection and planning were also further highlighted by QP2 and QP3:

Asking children to say yes or no to the pictures was chaotic and loud, so instead we asked them to put their hands up, which was better. A deaf child was not planned for, I learned from that. Planning and reflection are key (QP2).

It could have been improved by providing additional activity to gain a deeper view...there could have been more time designated for primary research with children (QP3).

Some of the students were surprised at the children's knowledge of health and safety and how risk-averse they appeared to be (QP1, QP4). One participant was surprised at how the children's ideas confirmed the theories and research that had been presented to them in lectures (QP1).

There were some negative responses from participants, but these focussed mainly on time constraints and the impact of the project upon their other studies (three responses). Comments referred to the difficulty of selecting relevant information, the importance of interpretation, and time constraints (IP1, QP4, QP3).

Theme 3 Impact upon academic, personal and professional skills

Students reported that the project had impacted upon their practice skills with children and their career prospects. Two commented on increased skills related to creativity, confidence, and flexibility (IP1 & QP4) while others commented upon their identity as a practitioner and the procedural aspects of practice (QP4, QP2). Two students made direct reference to their future career prospects, future practice and learning. (QP1, above and IP1).

It's nice to know that you might make a difference and that your opinion counts...like your voice counts...It's not just an essay you've written and then that's it, it's done. It's very nice. Out of all my modules, I did in my last year it's the one that stands out because it's the one I was most involved in. It made a difference.. It's helped my career up to now and it hasn't been long since I have finished the degree (IP1).

In terms of shifting identities this was alluded to from the response of QP4,

I think listening and valuing children's voices has had an impact upon myself both as a practitioner and as a student (QP4).

Further comments from QP2 and QP3 emphasised how the research foregrounded their ideas and positioned them as co-constructors of knowledge and co- researchers.

Discussion

Theme 1 Authenticity as relating to the 'real world'

The students who took part in this project clearly valued the authenticity of the research project as it related to the real world and had the potential to impact on children's lives. They expressed surprise at the real world, 'proper' nature of the project and at being treated as 'experts' in their field. At the stakeholder meeting in particular, there were significant shifts in identity, as students were consulted as early childhood experts and their ideas and views were listened to. Argent (2020:4) suggests that engagement in research felt like being "part of something bigger" and this was clearly the case for the students here. Working with others and differences of opinion were highlighted as constraints of the project, suggesting that collaboration and cooperation may need further attention within the students' current undergraduate course. The authentic nature of the task was clearly unusual within the context of the students' course, and raises questions about how students view assessments more generally within the university. Mumm, Karm and Remmik (2016:782) identify authentic assessment as,

...assignments that require deep and meaningful approaches to learning and are linked to the real world, i.e. those requiring the skills and knowledge that are expected in the professional field.

The comment from QP1, 'It's not just an essay you've done' lends support to the possibility that other assessment tasks used within undergraduate courses are not always viewed as authentic. This may be related to the contractual nature of higher education and the value placed upon activities that can be easily assessed, rather than experiential learning, which is more difficult to measure (Svojanosky,2017).The dissemination posters which the students completed were a fundamental part of the project but they were not formally assessed, and therefore, appeared to hold less value for the participants, a finding supported by Svojanovsky (2017). One of the

groups did not complete their dissemination poster at all, and the posters that were completed were of poor quality. Further responses relating to the real-world nature of the task demonstrated the links with professional skill and employment clearly supporting the views of Jopp (2019). The negative responses focussed on timing and impact on their other grades. Indeed, timing was found to be an important factor in Fuller, Mellor and Entwistle's (2014) findings, while concerns about the perceived impact upon grades and other assignments was found by Mumm et al. (2016). Due to their position as customers and the sense of entitlement this imbues, students may be more preoccupied with grades than the experience and knowledge gained. This raises questions about the expectations of students and the role of universities as more generally (Jensen and Bennet, 2016).

Theme 2. The existential authentic self

Wald and Harland (2017:754) discuss the importance of the existential authentic self as including "a sense of self and of being" in relation to responsibility and ownership of assessment tasks. They suggest that independent learning can occur when students are responsible for "not only finding answers but also being the ones asking the questions" (Wald and Harland 217:756). The student responses highlighted a strong sense of ownership and responsibility over the task which clearly resulted in independent learning. Deleuze (2004) highlights how meaning is constructed through social, discursive relationships; Wald and Harland (2017: 756) further note that learning is not "uni-directional" but constructed through dialogue between students and teachers. Furthermore, empowerment and motivation are highlighted by Linton, Baily, Nagouse and Williams (2019) as being key drivers for student engagement. The students were highly motivated by a sense of responsibility to reflect the children's ideas accurately, which led to critical reflection on the effectiveness and limitations of their chosen methodologies. This resulted in personal learning and adjustment of their methods; the students' recognition of the importance of inclusive practice and adaptability is clear in their responses. This would appear to support Wald and Harland's (2017) discussion about self-awareness, commitment to values and purpose in life. The value of reflection and planning are further mentioned in the responses, mirroring the benefits highlighted by Fuller, et al. (2014) demonstrating the acquisition of important skills and knowledge by students for future practice with children. Yates and Twigg (2016) further highlight that the procedural elements of practice are not always considered in higher education, these having to be learned through experience.

The most negative responses focussed on the writing up of findings by the students. However, this could be viewed as one of the most valuable aspects of their learning in terms of preparing students for the complexities, constraints, and realities of conducting research projects (Bellinger et al., 2014). It provided students with opportunities to enhance their critical thinking, writing skills, problem-solving and social skills. To some extent, students were constrained by the requirements of the formal assessment task (Bergmark and Westman, 2016) because they had to conform to the learning outcomes. Wald and Harland (2017:757) recognise that "imposed tasks and

required knowledge” within higher education assessment tasks may mitigate against personal meaning and thus engagement. This raises questions about the use of primary research within a module assessment format and how assessments are constructed more generally. Assessment must be explicit to conform to quality benchmarks, but we argue that it must be open enough for student ownership, interpretation and the possibility of unknown outcomes and new knowledge. Similarly, staff can be constrained by both higher education culture and their roles within the research process.

We saw this project as an opportunity for students to develop and hone their skills as researchers and as such, we adopted the role of facilitators (Wald and Harland, 2017). However, this was difficult and risky, as it meant that the students were ultimately responsible for the construction of the research instruments they used and the production of the dissemination posters - as a result, the posters (which were unassessed) were hastily produced and limited in information. The posters were a fundamental part of the research process but were not graded, revealing that students may place less emphasis on ungraded tasks than graded ones. This may have been evidence of the resistance from students moving out of their traditional roles in higher education identified by Deeley and Brown (2014) but could also have been influenced by the timing of the project. We purposely took a ‘back seat’ in the research process with the young children and therefore willingly took a risk here. Bergmark and Westman (2016, p38) suggest that such work brings “chaos and insecurity” and that support is needed for both parties in the process.

There were some unexpected findings in the project, which contested students’ knowledge. It was interesting to note that one student was surprised that the findings concurred with the knowledge and theories learned within the module. This response suggests students may not recognise how learning in lectures relates to the real world, indicating a disconnect between theory and practice. According to Wald and Harland (2017, p 756),

From a critical perspective, authenticity, including existential authenticity, is contingent on reflective critique of one’s own knowledge, values and beliefs.

We could argue that this is evidence that this may have been occurring for some participants.

Theme 3. Personal meaning

Wald and Harland (2017) suggest that student investment and commitment to assessment is dependent on the personal meaning attached to the task. They further highlight that personal meaning is difficult to find in higher education due to the need to demonstrate required knowledge and the imposed nature of tasks provided for students. Our participant’s responses suggest that their involvement as researchers provided them with a high degree of personal meaning and engagement.

Bovill et al (2016) suggest that co-creation between staff and students provides opportunities for deep learning and discourages student passivity. Our project placed

a high level of decision making and autonomy upon students as researchers and therefore, necessitated their participation and engagement, we argue this provided students with a high level of motivation and empowerment. This approach encouraged identity shifts between the role of 'researcher', 'student' and 'expert' and led to deep authentic learning in terms of carrying out research, the limitations of methodology and the difficulties of mediating different viewpoints.

In relation to their professional development, all respondents identified the enhancement of a range of personal and professional skills including, increased confidence, communication skills and team working, amongst others, which concurs with the ideas of Bellinger, et al. (2014) and Argent (2020).

The findings lend support to the use of research and the value of real -world assessments in higher education and how they prepare students for future practice, suggesting a high level of engagement and personal meaning. The application of skills, knowledge, planning, and the construction of research materials foregrounded students' ideas and positioned them as co-constructors of knowledge and researchers (Bellinger, et al, 2014). As suggested by Bergmark and Westman (2016) learning takes place in social and physical contexts, the students had to participate and negotiate with each other to construct meaning. While the assessed reports which formed part of the module were individually produced, the research materials and dissemination posters were produced in groups and pairs, so students could not be passive in the research. Bovill et al (2016:4), discuss how students "shift from being passive recipients...to being active agents" when they adopt responsibility for the educational process. In this research project, the students involved had to assume responsibility for their learning which invested the research with personal meaning.

Implications for future practice

It must be acknowledged that although students were positioned as equals and experts within the consultation, design, and implementation of the research project, the reports they produced repositioned them as 'students' or 'customers' as these were assessed as part of their contract with the university. Furthermore, according to Mumm et al, (2016), authentic assessment tasks may not be supportive of students when they are designed as part of summative assessment tasks. This implies that co-research can never really be 'equal' when part of a formal graded assessment due to the positioning of students as 'customers'. Linton, Baily, Nagouse and Williams (2019) further identify that hierarchical relationships can work against student engagement; but whilst recognising this unequal positioning between staff and students, Cook-Sather, Bovill and Felten (2014) remind us that students' views, contributions, and approaches can be valued equally and respected within research projects.

Our findings suggest that there is much value in engaging students in research in HE and these projects should be incorporated into the curriculum wherever possible. Despite the benefits for student learning, it is less clear if research projects should be used as forms of assessment. Organisational cultures which currently exist, can be problematic and create barriers to the success of such projects (Bergmark and

Westman, 2016). Time limits in relation to module schedules and assessment boards, mitigate against the flexibility and fluidity that is needed for assessment to be agile and responsive enough to take advantage of spontaneous opportunities for real-world research. Furthermore, fixed assessment criteria and learning outcomes require lengthy administration procedures to change wording or focus. Moving forward, we suggest that assessment tasks, criteria and learning outcomes are designed to be as open ended as possible to allow for fluid interpretations in practice, enabling lecturers and students to take advantage of spontaneous opportunities as they arise. Furthermore, the timing of projects needs to be carefully considered, as students may be unwilling to engage in tasks that require a commitment beyond assessed work, particularly in their final year. Therefore, engaging students in research as part the module curriculum may be more fruitful as assessment always carries the notion of credit. The 'Connected Curriculum Framework' adopted by UCL appears to be a useful way forward for 'enabling students to learn through active participation in research and inquiry' (Fung 2015,p 30) and may be useful for other academic institutions. Involving students in the design of module schedules and authentic assessment tasks may be an additional way to encourage further engagement and personal meaning.

On reflection, our capturing of the data in relation to the students' participation in the project could have been more robust to ensure all voices were heard and to increase the validity of the findings. This could have been achieved through more regular reflection opportunities throughout the process of the research using reflective diaries rather than after the research had taken place. Furthermore, the focus on research methodologies and the importance of data capture and dissemination may also need to be revisited within our research modules for future cohorts.

Conclusion

The participants involved in the research project viewed this as a positive and beneficial experience despite the time pressure and responsibility involved. The project differed from all other assessment tasks they had experienced, and they highly valued the opportunity to make a difference to children's lives. The results suggest that the research aligned with some of the elements of authenticity discussed by Wald and Harland (2017) through links with the 'real world', affording a high degree of personal meaning and some alignment to the authentic existential self. The results also imply that research can contribute to student engagement, active participation and independent learning. It was also clear that less value was placed on activities that were not assessed or graded which raises interesting questions about the changing nature of HE as a commodity within market policies, which may contribute to a transactional attitude by students. This is a rich area for further future research possibilities.

Research as an authentic assessment method, can provide a democratic way to engage students by affording them the role of expert, ownership over their own learning and enabling their voices to be heard. This can challenge traditional roles and hierarchy within higher education, but it is not without difficulties. Organisational barriers, time limits, increased staff workload and fixed learning outcomes and criteria,

work against the fluidity needed to respond to spontaneous opportunities. Careful timing is needed for such projects and the acknowledgement of the power differences within staff-student research needs to be considered when part of a formal assessment task. Furthermore, the changing nature of HE as a commodity within market policies may contribute to a transactional attitude by students, who may place more value on grades than the learning process. Moving forward, we would like to see flexibility built into teaching and assessment schedules so that opportunities can be located for students to engage in authentic real-world research tasks which benefit local communities; enabling meaningful engagement for the student and ownership of their own learning.

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